

Interview of Joseph Nechvatal by Nicolas Ballet
recorded live on September 20th 2015 chez Nechvatal in Paris



Joseph Nechvatal, 2015, Paris, photography de Nicolas Ballet.

Nicolas Ballet: How did you have the idea to make noise during the 1980s? And how did you meet Al Margolis from *Sound of Pig*?

Joseph Nechvatal: I don't think I have ever physically met Al. We connected by mail through the cassette network. Cassette culture related to Industrial culture but is much more post-industrial due to its reproductive emphasis. In that sense it moved audio ideas more towards electronics than the making of industrial noise did when it recorded powerful machines to metaphor psychic violence.

So, how did I start with noise? It started for me as a visual art project of conceptual drawings from the early 1980s. I was taking cliché images out of the mass media magazines and newspapers - that had to do with sex, or religion, the military, education - and tracing them one over the next. It was my excessive approach to Duchampian appropriation as I was overlapping them into palimpsests. The drawings at first glance look minimal but on deeper viewing reveal a super saturated field. The visual noise is the figurative/ground collapse. So my interests in noise started visually.

At the same time, I got into making audio collages and musique concrete that paralleled the visual overload that was happening in the drawings. When I first moved to New York I was making minimalistic conceptual works based on my passion for Jasper Johns. Early paintings and drawings were extremely minimal. I liked that aesthetic at the time very much, but I soon realized there were already masters of the genre ahead of me and I needed to kill my idols. It was stupid for me to pursue something that was already so well done by artists like Brice Marden, Fred Sandback and Carl Andre. It would have been stupid for me to stay within their aesthetic project. So I flipped it. I said to myself: "Well, if they're all about reduction and emptiness and

simplicity, I will be about excess and oversaturation and complexity. I will be about visual noise and overload.”

That’s how the noise idea came to me, as an aesthetic project but then I became very interested in no wave bands, seeing a lot of concerts at CBGB and the Mudd Club. I particularly enjoyed the guitar noise music of Rhys Chatham, but also dug Boris Policeband, DNA, The Contortions, Mars, The Fall, Negativland, and Glenn Branca. Their noise music paralleled my visual art noise.

I also was directly exposed to the intense avant-garde art music of Theatre of Eternal Music, Angus MacLise, Steve Reich, Phillip Glass, Pauline Oliveros, Richard Maxfield, and others through my day job as Dia Art Foundation archivist for La Monte Young. Even though La Monte was already very much into the Indian music phase of his career, I was archiving the early Fluxus noise pieces in his art and tape collection that included John Cage, Milan Knizak, Charlotte Moorman, John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Dick Higgins, Takehisa Kosugi, Philip Corner, George Brecht, Joe Jones, Wolf Vostell and others. So I was getting an interesting downtown Manhattan immersion into the art of noise, and just kept following that interest that first bloomed as the opera I did with Rhys Chatham.

Then I started using computers to make art in 1986 because my conceptual theme had focused on cultural and political ideology as a subject. Visual excess was my means to combat the computer control that clearly became the direction things were going. So I jumped on that subject pretty early on, well before the personal computer was available. But there were computer laboratories at universities, that I got access to, and I found a studio in Manhattan where I could access a computer-robotic painting machine in 1986. That’s where my first digital paintings were produced that took up the principle of visual overload. With the use computer-robotics to make paintings, metaphoric computer control content and formal painterly execution merged in complimentary fashion.

Nicolas Ballet: So in this period you materialized your concepts through computers. Maybe the *Electronic Revolution* by William S. Burroughs and his theories about virus (“language is a virus”) had an influence on your work?

Joseph Nechvatal: Burroughs clearly was an influence that dovetailed with my body-centered commitments to the virus in the early 1990s that was a response to the AIDS epidemic. I had a girlfriend who died of AIDS very early on and it was horrifying to see and very frightening. I imagined I had the virus without having the courage to get tested right away. I practiced safe sex but lived with this doomy possibility hanging over my head in the late-1980s. And then I got invited to work in France for the first time in 1990. This was during the Mitterrand era, and they were inviting international artists to come work as artist-in-residence all around France. The curator Francois Cheval invited me to go to a place I’d never heard of named Arbois, a little village where Louis Pasteur grew up, to work for a couple of years. So I found myself happily installed in the Louis Pasteur studio in Arbois thinking about Gilles Deleuze and his notion of the vacuole that he pulled out of the work of Burroughs. A vacuole is like a sac in a cell’s membrane, completely bound up inside the cell but also separate from it, like a virus. This was an intense period for me given my fear of the AIDS virus and my interests in Burroughs, particularly after reading *The Electronic Revolution* - where I think I first encountered

his language-as-a-virus idea that was very key for me. But that's on an intellectual level. Emotionally, it was much more dramatic than that. From the blend came the idea of making art through computers and computer viruses that became the first *Computer Virus Project* in 1991, where I wrote with Jean-Philippe Massonnie a computer code that we could interject into the body of my work that I had uploaded into an Apple computer at the Saline Royale, Arc-et-Senans in Bourgogne-Franche-Comté near Arbois. I was guest artist there also for almost two years. We wrote the program and then I experimented with it. I then did an exhibition of the *Computer Virus Project* at Saline Royale in 1993, and that exhibition toured around a few galleries. So yes, the Burroughs virus text was a key reference for me. I talked about it in the *Computer Virus Project* catalog. But that said, it was a kind of secondary supportive material to the emotional turmoil I was experiencing, that was much more grounded in my love life and body-centered than just fancy ideas.

Nicolas Ballet: Could you tell me more about the performances you made in the 1980s?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes, they climaxed with *XS: The Opera Opus* (1984-1986), the opera I did in Boston with no wave musical composer Rhys Chatham. I started in the mid-1970s as a performance artist and dancer. The first time I ever came to Europe was in 1978, touring with Carol Parkinson and Cid Collins our performance art in the company of Carolee Schneemann. I met a lot of European performance artists then in Belgium and Holland and France and on that tour saw an incredible Hermann Nitsch performance. Also Carolee performed nude on a slippery marble sculpture, with only me present, in a dim and nearly empty Belgium museum. That was incredible. We showed our performance art pieces in a few cities in Europe. Mine was very aggressive and sculptural, called "Trouble Light" (1977), and was mixed with very slow minimalist dance movement. I had studied and danced with Deborah Hey and performance and dance had been an ongoing element of my activities then. I helped organize a performance art series called *Free Speech Public Arts International* for a few days in 1979 at an empty space at 75 Warren Street with Carol and Cid.

Nicolas Ballet: Could you tell me more about the compilation *Audio by Visual Artists* (1988)? We can find here many key art references, like Beuys, Marinetti, Duchamp, Schwitters, John Armleder... How did you conceive of this compilation?

Joseph Nechvatal: You should talk to Claudia Gould about that one, because she, along with Carol and I, was the third member of my *Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine* project. On the first issue, I have a sound collage piece called "Ego Masher" (1983) that has been re-published in *An Anthology of Noise & Electronic Music, Vol. 6*. But you might talk to Claudio about *Audio by Visual Artists*, because that was mostly her baby. What we would do at *Tellus* is all agree on an issue idea, but someone would take the curatorial lead. For the post-industrial issue, *Power Electronics - Tellus #13* (1986) that included a harsh noise track by Merzbow, that was me, obviously. As was *Media Myth - Tellus #20* (1988) that included a fantastic track by Minóy. As curators we would support each other, and give each other space to develop something deeply. *Audio by Visual Artists* was Claudia's project, so I'm only very happy to be on it with Rhys Chatham. I have a photo from the *XS* opera scenery as part of that issue and Rhys has an excerpt of his music for *XS*.

Nicolas Ballet: Did you practice collage or mail art in this period in order to meet other artists?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes, but I wouldn't call it a practice. I, like other people, were totally obsessed with what we now call postmodernism, which gave permission to take from anywhere and make it your own by transforming it. For example, in 1988 I made an audio art piece called "Psychedelic Hermeneutic" that I included in *Media Myth* that is built on the first few seconds of the Jimi Hendrix song "Are You Experienced?" from his 1967 album *The Jimi Hendrix Experience*. A record that pretty much changed my young life.

I was watching my contemporaries do postmodernism and I wanted to separate myself out from this 'grab anything' practice. I was using appropriation in the selection of the images I was using in the early drawings, but I wanted to make them so hard to find that it really wasn't the point. The point was bigger than a single recognizable image that had been ripped off. The point was visual information overload. I could give a shit about Bob Hope or Marilyn Monroe or even Andy Warhol, though I like his *Death and Disaster* series. I was working against their ideological culture with the noise of information technology.

The idea was to resist the normal American TV culture, so I got involved with Collaborative Projects and ABC No Rio. We took over a building that we squatted as an art space for a while. In Colab there were filmmakers, musicians, painters and sculptors and I friended a lot of cool artists, like Kiki Smith. Like Kiki, Colab led me to the gallery system, because little by little Uptown and Soho galleries, like Brooke Alexander, were looking at the young artists of Colab and that led me to one-person shows, and the next thing you know, you're a professional artist.

Nicolas Ballet: In general, how did you conceive your album covers? The cover of *Sleep* (1983) for example...

Joseph Nechvatal: This is an image that I appropriated from Austin Osman Spare, a chaos magician that I found very interesting. I wrote a paper on him back then, but I rewrote it 2002 as a speech and that version has been published in my book of collected essay *Towards an Immersive Intelligence* and I reconsider Spare again in my book *Immersion into Noise*. My Spare piece is all about the idea of chaos magic, postmodernism, and electronics coming together in a field of imagination and visualization and potentiality and the virtual. That cover was a straight forward homage appropriation of a Spare trance drawing. It's credited, as clippings from a magic book I had purchased.

In the 80s I was very interested in magic, particularly in chaos magic. It had to do with drugs, also, to be honest. I was finding ways to think up new imagery. I didn't want to be a pop artist. I didn't want to be a minimal artist, anymore. To move on you must take risks to find alternatives. So I found chaos magic and excess and druggy visualization very useful in breaking away from standard art of the time and all forms of ideological brain washings. Spare was very, very relevant to me at that time, because television advertising and politics were coming together in a powerful brew. The rise to power of actor Ronald Reagan in America illustrated that. His right wing political campaign was based on a nostalgia that had a quasi-fascist feel to it.

It was shocking how successful he was in winning, so I saw a need for a push back against that kind of slick, professional, unquestioned, audio-visual material.

Nicolas Ballet: That's why the theories of William Burroughs are really important in industrial counter-culture, in order to short-circuit this new shape of power which is applied on individual...

Joseph Nechvatal: That's what the *Electronic Revolution* is all about! I saw Burroughs read a few times, the first at Columbia University where I was studying philosophy under Arthur Danto, when Burroughs was part of the 1975 *Schizo-Culture* conference organized by *Semiotext(e)*. It introduced the radical philosophies of post- '68 France to the New York avant-garde and featured Deleuze's presentation of the concept of the rhizome. As an artist I was very interested Burroughs's novels, of course, for his cut-up technique. I had read *Naked Lunch* and *Junky*, by then. But my interest in Burroughs didn't lead directly to my audio collages, even though his audio work certainly seemed super-related to them. Then, other audio collage projects came across my radar, like *Negativland* and John Oswald's *Plunderphonics*: both very good with cut-and-paste re-contextualization. In the early 80s I was accepting the idea of Burroughs's and Kathy Acker's kind of postmodernism, without being cynical about it. I wanted to use the freedom of postmodernism without it becoming conservative, which it more or less ended up being: where everything is permissible but nothing is important. So noise was a little bit of warding that off. Of course artists aren't more powerful than society. But Burroughs's transformative postmodernism was a psychic motivation for me to confront social norms.

Nicolas Ballet: And maybe the occult was a way to reinforce this motivation?

Joseph Nechvatal: As I mentioned before, I got interested in occult magic as a way to overcome psychological conditioning. In the 80s there were two magic bookstores in lower Manhattan, and I would go to them both often, and that's how I discovered Spare. Then I was surprised and delighted to find out that a few other people were interested in him, but I discovered him by myself first in an occult bookstore. Then, I went to the New York Library and did research on him, which became the basis of the first paper that I wrote about Spare.

I always had a pretty broad musical taste. I grew up on folk and then rock and then psychedelia. The first album I really, really loved was The Beatles *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) when I was sixteen. That was the first great sonic experience in my life. And then I discovered Hendrix and John Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders and Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Arkestra, and then the avant-garde classical music of Erik Satie, Pierre Schaeffer, Morton Subotnick, Pierre Henry, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Terry Riley and Arnold Schoenberg.

Nicolas Ballet: This is quite interesting because I have the feeling that industrial artists want to fight the status quo from the 1960s through "shock tactics". But the Psychedelic era of the 1960s is also their own culture. And when I see your title "Psychedelic Hermeneutic" on the

compilation *Media Myth* (1988) I think about this aspect...

Joseph Nechvatal: The title is tongue in cheek, obviously. In it I was having great fun with the great Hendrix guitar riff. (laugh). It was a collage idea that came out of a psychedelic trip.

Nicolas Ballet: On the cover of *Sleep* you mentioned Jean Baudrillard. Did you ever meet him?

Joseph Nechvatal: I met him in Arles and hung out with him there the year before he died, but I was very influenced by his work *Simulacres et simulation* (1981), as a lot of people were, in the 80s. But I have written critically on aspects of his work in a paper called *Jean Baudrillard and a Counter-Mannerist Art of Latent Excess* that was first published in *The International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*.

For *Sleep*, yes, I had been reading him and Paul Virilio in the 80s but my big discovery was Deleuze and Felix Guattari's book *Mille Plateaux* (1980). I remember I read it in Paris while on a wine drinking spree. I couldn't stop drinking or reading, although I knew I couldn't quite understand it all. I didn't care. It was like a Godard movie for me. Things slid by and connected elsewhere. The fact that you could jump around in the book, that it was a hypertext on paper, was so perfectly brilliant and immediately transfixed me. I think that book changed my views more than anything written by Baudrillard. But I like a lot of French philosophy. But also the French Symbolist poets. In high school I read French symbolist poetry constantly and it was important to my becoming an artist.

Nicolas Ballet: Yes, the theories of Deleuze and Guattari are really important in your work. Maybe Foucault too?


Joseph Nechvatal: I've read Foucault, and was rather moved by his *The Order of Things*. I know he's interesting and important, but he didn't stir my imagination in the same way.

Nicolas Ballet: Because he's not as abstract as Deleuze and Guattari are. It's really interesting to see their writings as a movie; you can free your mind through an abstract way of thinking...

Joseph Nechvatal: That's right. I find it so artistic. It's enriching for an artist to read and consider. They gave permission to connect ideas that I've never connected before through the rhizome. It's so rich and diverse - and the idea that it was a collaboration where I never knew who was writing what - was so liberating.

Also I went to Guattari's home to meet him once for drinks, and he was so cool. I gave him some copies of *Tellus* and he found my palimpsest drawings exciting. A pity he passed away soon thereafter.

Nicolas Ballet: Whereas Foucault also wrote about history and facts...

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes. I read  his *History of Sexuality* (1976-1984), and of course his book on prisons, *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and I was interested in what he had to say, but it didn't quite stir me with the same passion.

Nicolas Ballet: Can we speak about industrial music in the States? I have the feeling that survivalism is quite important in the American movement, with Mark Pauline for example...

Joseph Nechvatal: The overriding psychic mood then, which happily you can't relate to, was the coming nuclear apocalypse. It was not only kind of a scary, but an exciting idea. It seemed beyond imagination and a very real possibility. Everything cultural was kind of growing out of that.

You had your religious fundamentalists, which thought that an apocalypse was just a great idea. So you had to deal with religious fundamentalism mixed with nuclear militarism fueled by the military-industrial complex. Which is very good at spending money to develop its goals. Then you had a hot ideological conflict with the Soviet Union with Europe as the theater of combat. When Reagan put nuclear weapons into Europe, that seemed like a tipping point towards apocalypse. I remember a little bit of this apocalyptic fear as a boy too, with the Cuban Missile Crisis with John Kennedy. Kennedy put a blockade around Cuba because the Soviets were putting into Cuba intercontinental ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads. And Kennedy said: "No. That's not going to happen" and he put a blockade up, and that's an act of war, that brought a 13 day political and military standoff in 1962, and it looked like we were ticking down to go apocalyptic with a nuclear exchange with Russia. I was eleven years old then and scared shitless.

Then the looming apocalypse kind of went away for a while, but came back stronger than ever with the Reagan military buildup. The apocalypse rhetoric got heated up good then. It was a very big issue, because of Reagan. One of the ways he won the election was by accusing the Carter administration of being weak on Russia, and that Carter was a softy who had let the Soviets get nuclear superiority over America. Can you imagine? Of course that wasn't true, but that rhetorical lie was very much dominant in everyone's minds. So yes, there was a kind of doomy atmosphere to industrial culture. No doubt.

Nicolas Ballet: Maybe this atmosphere inspired you to formulate the notion “Nuclear/Electronic” that appears on the cover of *True and False* (1985)?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes, and I think the whole idea of surviving a nuclear war was a very difficult idea to imagine, but one that we grappled with in industrial and post-industrial music. How does one survive the destruction of the world? How does culture survive a nuclear exchange?

Nicolas Ballet: And can you tell me more about the notion of transhumanism in your work?

Joseph Nechvatal: My first brush up against that idea would have to be the performance artist Stelarc. I think I first saw references to Stelarc performances in *RE/Search* magazine. He got me attracted to the cyborg idea. And then a major text for me became Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*. That was kind of a tipping point also.

My basic interest is in transgression of the norm without the specific definition of transhumanism. French philosophers like Deleuze being very much a part of that.

But then I saw the big blockbuster movies *Terminator* and *Blade Runner*. *Blade Runner* was a huge success with me. I used to get high and go to St. Mark’s Cinema to see this movie at midnight quite often. I must have seen it five times, because it was such a great night out with friends. And as it showed at midnight, I could go to a club like Pyramid after that to dance. It was really, really fun. So the cyborg was very much integrated into my banal downtown culture.

But also don’t forget about other huge influences on me in that respect like John Cage, even though he’s not typically thought of as transhumanist. His ideas of chance operations took me outside of classical humanist methodology, as you allow chance to be an agent in your production. It stirs something outside of human volition. So I think the post-Duchamp, post-Dada legacy of Cage and Robert Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham play an equal if not greater role in my transhumanist thought. I think Duchamp is really, really important in that regard.

Nicolas Ballet: Yes, the legacy of Dada is really important in cyborg culture. Matthew Biro wrote a great book about this aspect: *The Dada Cybog*. Science fiction is also important in your work. I think about Ballard for example...

Joseph Nechvatal: I loved the Biro book and Ballard. I read *Crash!* of course, and it blew my fragile egg shell mind. I saw the movie *Crash!*, which sucked, but the book was really challenging. I read it twice because it was so disturbing the first time. I’m not sure I see the cyborg influence there, so much, however. That came to me in the science fiction novel *Neuromancer* (1984) by the American author William Gibson. Also Philip K. Dick. I was reading a lot of Philip K. Dick, I like Dick, but he was also a nasty read about the paranoia of drugs.

Nicolas Ballet: He was really paranoid?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes, he was.

Nicolas Ballet: Like Artaud, who became mad. Maybe Artaud was also an influence, also for his “Theater of Cruelty”?

Joseph Nechvatal: Very much so. I vividly remember reading Susan Sontag’s excellent introduction to her book *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings* in the late-70s on a train ride back to Chicago. Then I said to myself that I have to know everything about this weird person. I have to see everything he did. And finally an exhibition of his drawings came to the Museum of Modern Art. Wonderful! Then I heard his radio show. In fact, I appropriated some of his radio show and put noise over it for animation clips I have put up at YouTube. I got so interested in this man. I saw his performance in Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *Joan of Arc* (1928), a fabulous silent movie in the expressionist style. The movie is incredible because, for long periods, the camera won’t move - and you see a thought or emotion hang there – slowly going across the face of Renée Falconetti. She’s amazing. You silently ride this incredible roller coaster of emotions, felt through the eyes. Her face sort of melts and transforms and transgresses itself. Also Artaud is wonderful in it. It’s a great film I have seen many times.

Nicolas Ballet: The notion of totalitarianism is very important in the visual productions of some industrial bands.

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes. The Nazi connection.

Nicolas Ballet: Yes. What do you think about this kind of imagery in industrial music?

Joseph Nechvatal: I am ambivalent. Hitler was a painter! I too was interested in Nazi imagery at a certain point, through the work of John Heartfield. Indeed, I put on an exhibition of his work in New York at ABC No Rio that was sponsored by the Collaborative Projects group I previously mentioned. We squatted an abandoned space as an art gallery, and then we got a building to use from the city and were able to do whatever we wanted there.

Yes, I was very interested in the criticism of totalitarian imagery and in fascism in the 80s. I think it had to do with the feeling – probably this was exaggerated – that the rise of fundamental religion and political power in America was upon us, with the rise of hard right conservatism, which played on quasi-Nazi visual imagery. It had a feeling that fascism in America was possible, that America could slide into a kind of soft fascism, and almost without knowing it, end up fascist. So that was the reason I was interested in John Heartfield’s use of Nazi imagery.

I think originally Throbbing Gristle was interested in Nazi imagery just to shock. For purely shock value, which, OK, if you do that once, you did it and it’s over. It no longer really shocks. It becomes style.

Also my interest in Nazi imagery had to do with the look of punk, because they also used Nazi swastikas in punk fashion and music imagery. And I guess that was a reaction to what they thought might have been happening in England, with the rise of the right there and the decline of socialist values: the decline of the collective power of unions and syndicates. It was the beginning of what we now call privatization. Fascinating fascism was a kind of visceral, stupid, naïve reaction to the decline of collective social power in the Anglo world. I think that was the motivation behind it for many.

I know I felt that I had to introduce some of Heartfield's imagery into the art world then – which I did – but also into the street. We Colab artists would go out into the street with posters at the time and I did that as part of the Heartfield project too. So I brought some of his anti-Nazi imagery into the street all lower Manhattan. You got Heartfield on Wall Street. I was trying to make a social statement: "Wake up, people! Don't wake up after it's too late. We have fascists among us." So probably, if I'm generous, it's that use of fascist imagery that was attractive to Industrial music artists too. But in industrial music, I think there *were* some people that were into pure shock and then others who were actually attracted to far rightwing neo-Nazism. Real assholes.

Nicolas Ballet: Industrial audiences can also be fascinated by the transgression of this aesthetic...

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes, again, by the breaking of a taboo. But to what purpose? To keep freedom alive? That's one aspect of it. But it was more reactionary than that, I think, in many cases: a reaction against hippies. Punks were just trying to be the opposite of hippies. Hippies were about the feminizing anti-war man and marijuana, love, peace, psychedelics, love ins - and punks were the opposite of that, by design. So, what's more un-hippie than a Nazi.

Nicolas Ballet: It was a solution to fight the idyllic solution of the hippies.

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes, and Charles Manson had a swastika on his head...

Nicolas Ballet: And he represented the fall of the psychedelic era.

Joseph Nechvatal: Absolutely he did.

Nicolas Ballet: That's why the members of Psychic TV wore t-shirts with the portrait of Charles Manson on it, in order to expose the end of the hippie era.

Joseph Nechvatal: That's right. You had Manson madness and you had the Altamont concert killing with the Rolling Stones on stage, where the Hell's Angels – who also wore Nazi insignias – killed a black dude right in front of the stage - and that was the end of the Woodstock community ideal. Woodstock was like: "We really can live together, people are positive, we love each other, we can feed each other, we don't need guns, we

don't need war." It was like this super affirmation of the goodness of high humans, then immediately: "No. Not so fast." The bubble broke.

Nicolas Ballet: The use of Nazi imagery was maybe a way to expose the new kinds of totalitarianism generated by the mass media of the 1970s and 1980s?

Joseph Nechvatal: Right. Right. Let's go a little deeper into that. That's an excellent point I touched on earlier. The idea that drew me to the art of excess and overload in information technology was a kind of combat against what I saw as the totalitarianism of the corporate mentality. But you have to go inside the corporate beast; you can't defeat the beast from outside – and this is one of Baudrillard's ideas. You have to be a virus that goes inside and destroys the corporate with sabotage from within. Because if you're without, you're just rejected and defended against. But if you can penetrate and you seduce the corporate – with the power of seduction in the simulacrum –, you can achieve something that transforms. That's his theory and that was a very powerful idea to artists at the time. At least to me, it was.

I wanted to penetrate culture like a virus to fuck up the totalitarianism of communications and the totalitarianism of the corporate mentality, even though I can enjoy pop culture too. I realized this objective with my use of computer technology in my paintings, like *The Informed Man* (1986), and with the *Power Electronics* and *Media Myth* cassettes, which confront the popular media and pop culture ease.

That said: I like Michael Jackson. I think Michael Jackson was really, really good, at the beginning. But come on, pop culture is not enough. We need much, much more than that. Everyone has to empower themselves to create on their own. Not just consume corporate culture.

So, that was my approach to art: to push back against the totalitarianism of popular culture. Which is far less evil than a governmental, prison-based totalitarianism, but I think they feed off each other. When you have people that are asleep and following their culture like cows without thinking, without questioning, without creating themselves, you have an atmosphere that facilitates political totalitarianism.

Now I've never really lived under totalitarianism, so I can't say that for sure. I'm a privileged American and I've always lived under freedom, freedom of speech, and all the excesses of the American experience.

Nicolas Ballet: Yes, the geographic context is very important to understand culture. There is a big difference between the historical context in France. It is very different from the history of Slovenia for example, with band like Laibach...

Joseph Nechvatal: I saw them perform in the 1980s at the Kitchen. There's a perfect example of a fascist package, and you're trying to understand: "Is it irony? Or it's real?" I think they played that game very nicely. I mean it was a very shrewd marketing technique for some pretty interesting sounds and ideas.

Nicolas Ballet: A business model in order to have a control over their own audience...

Joseph Nechvatal: That's right. It's a kind of cultural business model perhaps. I think Jeff Koons might be

playing it, you know: “Is he serious? Could he possibly be serious?” Hard to know. If you think how Prince presented himself at first as: “I might be white, I might be black, I might be straight, I might be gay. I’m not saying...”, so people could project anything they like onto him.

I and other people in the industrial and post-industrial period were also interested in pornography as a parallel with the Nazi imagery. That was another kind of taboo back then. One was not supposed to show pornography in public, in an art context. Certainly not. So it was transgressive to do so. Porn is clearly sexist but was a tool to break the rule for a while. And then it’s no longer interesting to do so. It’s a dangerous art game to play.

Nicolas Ballet: Maybe today provocation isn’t as important as in the 1980s...

Joseph Nechvatal: It was easier then to provoke because there were so many hot buttons. Madonna: she knew exactly what buttons to push. She did a whole album on sex that was very graphic. She was supposed to be this popular artist, supposedly appealing to teenagers. It was a very edgy business model for her, but it succeeded, obviously.

That was also to do with the liberation of gays. There was transgression in coming out of the closet also for them. One wasn’t supposed to know or care how gays lived and loved, what they did, or what their leather preferences were. And all of a sudden, we had Robert Mapplethorpe showing us. So again, a breaking of the communicative boundaries with images was part of breaking cultural totalitarianism.

Nicolas Ballet: Some of your images function as a virus. This notion is very important in your work. How do you consider the concept of noise in your work today?

Joseph Nechvatal: It’s absolutely essential. I consider the virus as a form of noise, largely because it confronts the host image and because of the chance operation that’s working in it. My art of noise virus has everything to do with what we have talked about. It is about canceling out the obvious cultural symbols by problematizing the habitual. It is about disturbing the calmness of communication.

Electronic communication now is so smooth and effortless; we need some noise in the system. Think of the way we download any musical track imaginable, and then hardly ever listen to them, which is typical. It’s so smooth and effortless now that sometimes a little difficulty might be good for us, as it increases desire. Cultural noise is a nice benefit to our consciousness because it wakes us up a bit. We have to deal with noise. It is something we need to chill with, to accept, and to a certain extent, enjoy.

Personally, I enjoy many levels of noise in sound and visual art a great deal. If something is too obvious and too pleasant at first glance, I lose interest rather quickly. Even in literature I like authors, like Jean Genet, that pretty much write in a labyrinthine. Maybe their sentences are considered way too long for some people, but I love that. I’m attracted to that level of tipsy challenge.

I try to bring some of that challenge into my art work, for all the reasons we talked about, plus it makes for beautiful other-worldly kinds of experience.

Nicolas Ballet: The notion of challenge is very interesting because noise is also difficult to grasp?

Joseph Nechvatal: That's right. It creates levels of difficulty, which most people want to avoid.

Most people only want to be 'successful' so they run the opposite way from noise. They think: "Oh it has to be easy for people to get right away. Everything has to be quick, and easy, and simple, and immediate or people will lose interest." They think that people don't have time, that people don't have attention spans anymore. I guess that's true to some extent, but it doesn't mean I want to play the short game, because it bores me silly.

As long as I can live as an artist and be relatively free, that's success for me. I don't necessarily need the money of the masses behind me to succeed. I'm not selling eye candy to the crowd. I don't need quantity as much as certain qualities. And some of these qualities make people think that there is something 'wrong' with my art. They think that if the art is difficult – and again I use art in terms of literature, music, sound, painting, sculpture, everything – they think something is wrong with it. That it is broken or perhaps elitist. But I think there's everything right about it and that that rightness is for all. The difficult fun of the cut-up, of what is random in my virus project, with its chance elements, is for all. So, that's another kind of taboo breaking that I think is the legacy of Burroughs and Industrial culture writ large.

Nicolas Ballet: And self-projection into media and publicity is so important today that we became the media...

Joseph Nechvatal: Isn't this the principle of branding? Let's use a woman's handbag as an example. It's probably the best example. When you walk around with a handbag that has the Chanel logo on it almost as big as the whole bag, aren't you advertising for Chanel? Well, aren't you? You are! They used to pay people to walk around with a sign that said: "Buy your bags at Chanel." Now the consumer does that for them for free. How dumb. How corporations got away with that, I still don't understand, but am fighting with my art ideas.

I hate branding and self-selling. That's why I'm very attracted to the no logo cultural-political movement. Mine may be a marginal, counter-cultural taste, and certainly not very powerful or effective, but it's an aesthetic that I feel comfortable with. At least I can keep my dignity in tack.

Nicolas Ballet: And maybe you can suppress the logo, the media, with noise...

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes. Bury the clean pop picture signal in the noisy static of the electronic signal, jamming all transmissions that limit our growth.